1: Freeman E-5 (1949-1951) 1955 OC6 Iban OC6

brassware in particular. Almost every Iban long-house contains valuable old plates and bowls, but it is in jars (*tajau*) that most interest is taken. The collection and evaluation of these *tajau* (which are mostly of Chinese origin) is a considerable cult; there are scores of different varieties, and some of the oldest jars are believed to possess spirits (*antu*) and are regularly presented with offerings. Brassware takes the form of gongs, cannons, trays and boxes. All of these things (together with beads, ikat fabrics, silver jewellry, etc.) have value in Iban society as prestige objects; but brassware and ceramics are of particular importance as a form of property which, in emergency, can be sold or exchanged. They are, in other words, a kind of capital, and the principal way which the Iban have of investing their savings.

172. Brassware and valued jars are not produced by the Iban themselves, they have to be purchased from Chinese or Malay traders, from other Iban, or the members of neighbouring tribes. There are two main ways of obtaining them: (*a*) by producing a surplus of *padi*, and using this as a medium of exchange; or (*b*) by earning money on a *bejalai*. When men go on journeys they are expected to return home with valuables of some kind, and their social prestige is enhanced if they are regularly successful in their quests. Further, and most importantly, the property which a man does succeed in acquiring is put into the general pool of his *bilek* family's possessions, and thus becomes part of the general family estate. In other words, the *bilek* family as a whole benefits. It is for this reason that young men are encouraged to undertake journeys and to seek work. It is a common thing to hear a mother speaking proudly of the prowess and enterprise of her son, or a wife of the valued possessions which her husband has brought back from his travels.

Division of Labour

173. As we have seen, both men and women participate in the cultivation of *padi*, but as with most subsistence economies there is a well defined division of labour between the sexes. In general, those tasks requiring great strength and energy fall to the men, while the women are responsible for work that is more onerous and time devouring but well within their physical capacities. Again, the division of labour is so arranged that most of the essentially male jobs (e.g. slashing, felling and dibbling) fall within a span of about three or four months (i.e. June—September), leaving the rest of the year free for all those men not actually responsible for the managing of a farm. The presence of at least one man throughout the *padi* cycle, to build a *langkau*, fences and traps, to guard the farm at nights, to carry in and thresh the crop, is virtually essential if a farm is to succeed. Most *bilek* families function on this basis. In 1949-50, for example, only five (or 19%) of the 26 farming units of Rumah Nyala had more than one adult male present throughout the whole agricultural year, and none had more than two. Five *bilek* families had one man, and two families two men, absent on journeys for the greater part, if not the whole of the year. Women, on the other hand, do not travel away from the long-house, except to visit in neighbouring communities (usually during the lull that follows the harvest), or to make occasional brief visits to the nearest Chinese bazaar. At Rumah Nyala there were several women who had not been to Kapit bazaar (less than half a day's journey away) for ten and more years. Of the 52 women at Rumah Nyala, only two had been further afield (i.e. down river) than Kapit.

174. Among the Iban the women are much more conservative than the men,

6: Freeman E-5 (1949-1951) 1958 OC6 Iban OC6

THE FAMILY SYSTEM OF THE IBAN OF BORNEO

THE FAMILY APARTMENT

While they may vary slightly in width, all of the separate family apartments of an Iban long-house are basically similar in construction. Each apartment always consists of a single walled room (with an attic above it), a section of the roofed gallery, and a division of the open platform which fronts the whole house. Of these, the walled room or *bilek* is by far the most important. First and foremost the *bilek* is the family parlour: the normal location for cooking, eating, sleeping, and a host of domestic tasks. But not only is the *bilek* the setting for a family's mundane life, it is also the place where all of its valued heirloom property is displayed or stored. At the back of each parlour stands the family's collection of *tajau*—massive pottery jars, usually of Chinese manufacture, one or other of which, because of its great age, may have become an object of religious veneration. Stacked in the corners or suspended from the side walls is the family's bronze ware: gongs of many shapes and sizes, trays and boxes for use in the ceremony of betel chewing, and perhaps a Malay cannon or two. Other family possessions, less durable and more rarely used, resplendent *ikat* fabrics, the silver jewellery and bead garments of the women, the feather head-dresses and traditional accoutrements of the men, are securely stored away and only brought out on ritual or gala occasions. All of these valuables make up an important part of the family estate.

Ranged along the back of the long-house, then, are a series of family rooms, each divided from its neighbour by a side wall of planks or bark. Each of these rooms is connected by a hinged door (which may be barred from within) to the great gallery (*ruai*) of the long-house, which serves as a kind of general thoroughfare and is the principal venue of the community's social and ritual life. Of this gallery each family possesses its own section, and although the whole of the *ruai* is ordinarily open to all members of the long-house, each family retains the prescriptive right to cordon off its own part whenever, for ritual reasons, the need arises. Here and there, in about the centre of the *ruai*, in smoke-blackened clusters, hang the trophy heads or *antu pala*, with which so many of the most cherished values and beliefs of the Iban are associated. But each cluster is always the private property of the family on whose section of the gallery it hangs, for trophy heads are never owned by the long-house as a whole.

From each family division of the gallery an opening gives access to the open platform, or *tanju*, which like the *ruai* runs from end to end of the long-house, providing a space where rice may be sunned and garments dried. Of this platform, too, each family possesses its own portion.

Each family then, owns and occupies a single apartment (made up of a *bilek*, a *ruai*, and a *tanju*), and it is the joining together of a series of these

TABLE 14. BILEK PARTITION

Long-house	*Number of instances of bilek partition*	*Overall increase in number of bileks*
Rumah Nyala	5	22.7%
Rumah Sibat	13	56.5%
Rumah Tungku	16	44.4%

62. This high incidence of *bilek* partition can be co-related with a rising population. It will be obvious that partition never occurs if a family has only one child, for this individual is then the sole heir. Again, if all families produced two children the tendency would be for one of them to marry out, and the other to be left in possession of the natal *bilek*. But as soon as the majority of families rise above this level partition is sure to occur, for, as will be shown in the analysis that follows, it is extremely rare for a pair of siblings, each of whom is married, to remain permanent members of their natal *bilek*. Sooner or later, one couple breaks away to set up a *bilek* of their own. Thus nowhere amongst the Iban did I encounter an instance of married siblings with adult children, who were still living together in the same *bilek*. Furthermore there are few cases of individuals who either never marry, or finish up as permanent divorcees without children of their own. In the three long-houses, Rumah Nyala, Rumah Sibat and Rumah Tungku, there were only eight men and four women who fell into these categories, or about 5% of the total of 239 individuals, 31 years of age and over. From these facts it will be seen that an increasing population necessarily results in the proliferation of *bilek-families* by process of partition.

Causes of Bilek Partition.

63. What are the causes which give rise to these high rates of *bilek* partition? As has been already explained the *bilek-family* is a corporate group, and all *bilek* property and other rights are held in common by all members of the family. This does not mean that there is no concept of personal property. A man's clothes are his own, as are his various accoutrements and most of the weapons he uses; and in the same way, a woman possesses her own garments and jewellery. But all the really valuable possessions (or, *peseka*) of the *bilek*, made up of brass gongs and cannons, Chinese jars, plates and bowls, woven fabrics, beads and other ceremonial attire, plantations of fruit trees, tracts of *padi* land, *antu pala*, charms and *padi* seed, are held in common family ownership. For any particular *bilek*, most of the property will have been acquired by past generations of the family, but the present members will also have contributed their share. If the *padi* crop is an abundant one, part of the surplus is always used to purchase property for the *bilek*, and the men of the family, when they undertake their expeditions (*bejalai*), whether inland to gather jungle produce, or to the coast to work for wages, are expected to return home with some articles of value to add to the common inheritance. Similarly all the members of a family work together as a team to grow the rice they require; for in this, as in all other economic pursuits, they co-operate to form a single producing and consuming unit. This system of common ownership, production and consumption by the *bilek-family* works satisfactorily enough as long as the *bilek-family* remains restricted in numbers. In the case of small families, such as those consisting of a man, his wife and their children, it is, indeed, an ideal arrangement, for there is a complete concurrence of interests. But when the children of a family grow up and become adults stresses very frequently develop. In most families, one, at least, of the sons or daughters marries out, and so attains membership of some other *bilek*, but, if the family be a large one, it is usual for two or more of the other sons and daughters to remain as members of their natal *bilek*. Should two of these siblings marry while still retaining membership of their natal *bilek*, processes are set in train which almost inevitably end in partition.

64. Within the *bilek-family* siblings are equals, owning the same rights and the same obligations, and as such they are joined by strong bonds of solidarity. But when, in due course, these siblings marry, and children are born, this results in the intrusion of new and rival loyalities. The *bilek-family* is no longer a simple group, for it now contains within its boundaries two different elementary families. Crucial questions at once arise. Can these two families succeed in remaining merged as a corporate unit. Is it possible for a man to recognize as equal the claims of his own family and those of his sibling's family? For the great majority of cases the answer to these questions must be plainly in the negative. Iban parents are primarily concerned with their own children and the well-being of their own immediate family; and when two elementary families emerge within the confines of the same *bilek* there is an extremely strong tendency for their interests to diverge. This divergence is prompted by many different factors. Between families sharing the same menage and the same cramped quarters, disagreements and misunderstandings readily arise. There are, for example, numerous occasions for partiality and favouritism, and these easily lead to heart-burning and resentment. A man returning from a journey to the coast brings back more and much better gifts for his own wife and children than he does for his sister and her children, and so breaks the rule that within a *bilek* there should be equal sharing. Or there arises the more serious complaint that one couple are not participating as they should in the arduous work of padi farming, on which the very subsistence of the *bilek* depends. A wife, on some pretext or other, shirks part of the back-breaking task of weeding, and her husband's sister broods over

The Partition of Bilek property.

70. What then are the principles which govern the partition of the property and other rights which constitute a *bilek*? Of cardinal importance is the principle that siblings are parceners, or coheirs. This rule applies to all brothers and sisters who are resident members of the *bilek*. Equally important is the acknowledgement in Iban customary law (*adat*) that the *bilek* is, in general, a partible estate. Should a sibling and spouse, for example, elect to part company with the other members of a family, it is recognized that they have a lawful and undeniable claim to a proportionate share of the conglomeration of property and other rights which make up the inheritable possessions of the *bilek*. But there are certain exceptions of the greatest consequence, for two ritual objects, in particular, are strictly non-partible. Both are associated with the growing of *padi*.

71. In Iban eyes *padi* is by far the most precious thing which they possess: it is the main source from which wealth flows, and upon its successful cultivation all well-being depends. To the Iban however, the cultivation of *padi* is not so much a problem in agricultural method, as a problem in ritual knowledge and skill. *Padi* is a spirit, and a farmer's success depends pre-eminently on his ability to order his dealings with the *padi* spirits in such a way as to win their approval, and attract to himself the bountiful crops which all men desire. To this end, the Iban have, through the centuries, devised a series of most elaborate rites. All of these rites are focussed upon a strain of sacred rice, known as *padi pun*. Each year a tiny patch of this *padi pun* is sown in the centre of the farm, and here are performed the intricate sequence of magico-religious rituals upon which, it is believed, rests the fertility of all the padi that has been planted. At this stage however, we are concerned with the fact that every *bilek-family* has its own particular variety of *padi pun*. Unlike ordinary kinds of rice, *padi pun* is never sold or given away, for this would be to dissipate its magical efficacy, acquired during the countless rituals carried out by past generations. In addition to its *padi pun*, a *bilek-family* also possesses three or four subsidiary strains of sacred *padi*. These are termed *sangking*, and each year they are sown in small plots immediately around the *padi pun* itself. Although all rituals are focussed primarily on the *padi pun*, the several *sangking* also fall within their ambit. It is rather as if the *padi pun* were the eldest of a band of brothers. Every different *padi pun* has a personal name peculiar to itself, and the same applies to all the different kinds of *sangking*. For example, Kubu's *bilek*, of Rumah Nyala, possessed a *padi pun* called Letop, and four *sangking* named Bauk, Segendang, Pinang and Mawang. It is one of the axioms of Iban *adat* that the *padi pun* of a *bilek* is non-partible. What then is the solution when a family subdivides into two separate households? Briefly, it is this: the senior section retains possession of the *padi pun*, while the junior and emergent section is presented with one of the *sangking*, which is then elevated to become its *padi pun*. This is clearly a matter of crucial importance in the study of the process of *bilek-family* formation in Iban society. The senior section of a family is always definable by the fact that its *padi pun* was inherited as *padi pun* from the previous generation; while the *padi pun* of a junior section was inherited as *sangking*. By studying the inheritance of *padi pun* and *sangking* therefore, it is always possible to establish the main line of a family, and the various offshoots from it, which have been brought about by partition.

72. A second non-partible object is the *batu pemanggol*—a ritual whetstone, which is the centrepiece of the rites that initiate the yearly farming cycle, and the most important charm which a family owns. A few Iban families still possess whetstones upon which human victims—captives taken in war—were once sacrificed. Such stones are called *batu jaum*, and are immeasureably valuable in Iban estimation. To divide a *batu pemanggol* would be to destroy it, and so, when partition takes place, it is always retained by the senior section of the *bilek*. The junior section, seeking an auspicious occasion, gathers a suitable looking stone from the riverbed. With a great show of solemnity, the new stone is touched on the old, and then consecrated; tutelary spirits are invoked and offerings made, and finally a pig (or cock) is sacrificed upon its surface. When partition occurs then, the senior section of the family always retains the ancestral *padi pun* and *batu pemanggol*. It may also happen that a *bilek* possesses some other unique magical or ritual object, and if this is the case, this too is retained by the senior section. Again, it is the senior section which continues to occupy the family's old apartment, while the junior section sets about constructing a new apartment, joined to one end or other of the longhouse.

73. With these few exceptions all the other property of the *bilek* is partible, and its apportionment is in accord with the relative size and composition of the two sections resulting from the partition. Thus, if each section contains one married sibling—the property is divided as equally as possible between them. On the other hand, if the senior section contains two siblings, and the junior section only one, the apportionment is then in the proportion of two to one, and so on. The share allotted to affines depends on the period of time for which they have been members, and during which they have contributed to the prosperity of the *bilek*. Cases do occur in which long-standing affines are granted exactly the same share as natal members. Plantations of rubber and fruit trees are also usually divided, though it is sometimes agreed that both sections should continue to have equal access to the crop of fruit trees. Similarly, both sections have the right to farm land acquired by the family (by the felling of virgin jungle) prior to partition having taken place. That is, there is a joint sharing of rights but no actual partition of the land itself. Land cleared by their section subsequent to partition however, is independently owned. This situation will be discussed in detail when we come to the subject of land tenure and usage.

74. More often than not the apportionment of property is carried out by the members of the two families themselves in private conference. But cases do occasionally happen in which feelings run so high that agreement cannot be reached, and in this event, the *tuai rumah* and

352 Only the poorest families do not have at least one large bed in the bilik and mattresses of kapok are increasingly common. Beds and mattresses are purchased from Chinese craftsmen in Sibu and then transported, often with much difficulty, to the longhouse. Mattresses on beds may be covered with tikai or, if they are placed on the floor, are rolled up against one of the walls when not in use. Pillows and mosquito nets complete the sleeping gear found in many bilik.

342 513 Married men and women sleep in the bilik, along with their young children. Girls always sleep in the bilik or sadau, while boys begin to sleep on the ruai from age twelve. Nursing infants sleep with their mothers and fathers or, if space in bed is inadequate, fathers sleep apart from the others, usually on the floor not far from them. In the few situations encountered of three-generation families who operate a shop, parents in the senior generation always slept in the shophouse, sometimes with a grandchild, and the intermediate generation slept in the bilik.

342 422 Most families keep their property in the bilik, and all heirlooms, such as old Chinese jars (tajau), large bronze gongs (tawak), sets of gamelan gongs (engkerumong), and the family's sacred rice (padi pun) and rice medicine are stored there or in the sadau. Increasingly, Chinese-made cupboards, desks, tables and chairs appear in the bilik. In six of the bilik at Rumah Nyala, vinyl-covered, foam-rubber cushioned chairs and couches are found. Traditional costumes and fabrics are still stored in the bilik, but now with colorful synthetic clothes in glass-doored cupboards like display cases.

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